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Committed to Advancing Equitable Student Access to Highly Trained Reading Educators

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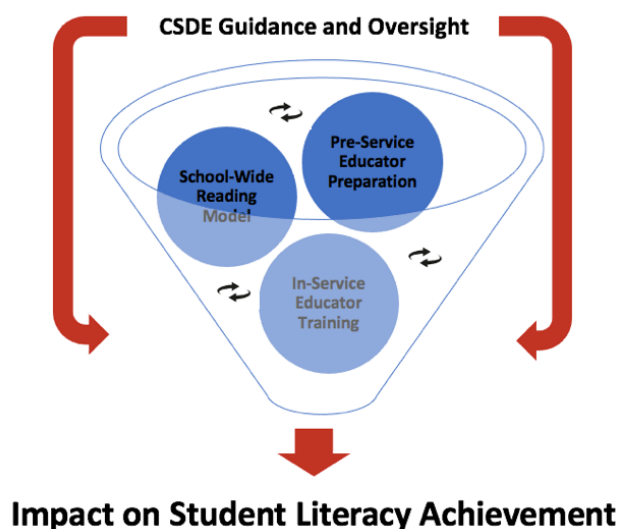
March 2, 2021

Dear Members of the Higher Education and Employment Committee:

As Co-Chair of the Task Force to Analyze the Implementation of Laws Governing Dyslexia Instruction and Training, Director of Reading and Language Development at Fairfield University, an Independent Educational Evaluator (IEE) specializing in the identification and remediation of dyslexia, and the former Chief Academic Officer of Educator Training Initiatives with the International Dyslexia Association (IDA), I would like to offer my full support for House Bill 6517, with minor amendments as outlined within the testimony of my Task Force Co-Chair, Allison Quirion.

Most importantly, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to each of you for taking the time to craft such a thorough bill, whose components not only address legislative compliance deficits outlined within the Task Force report, but also complement existing State Department of Education guidance documents and frameworks, including most notably Connecticut's Framework for Response to Intervention (2008). State-wide implementation of this framework has the potential to positively impact Connecticut's seemingly intractable achievement gap, but will require a coordinated and collaborative effort between the State Department of Education, Educator Preparation Programs (including those that prepare general educators, remedial reading and remedial language arts teachers/specialists/consultants, special educators, school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, and school administrators), *and* Connecticut's public schools.

Advancing Connecticut's Response to Intervention (RTI) Framework



Response to intervention emphasizes the provision of effective instruction for all students through evidence-based core general education practices and targeted interventions for students identified as experiencing learning, social-emotional or behavioral difficulties.

The interaction between districts' school-wide reading models, incoming educators' level of knowledge and skill (gained through pre-service preparation), and in-service educator training is what enables districts to effectively prevent reading failure and intervene at the earliest signs that a student is at-risk or off-track. Student literacy achievement is negatively impacted when any one of these components are absent or weak.

House Bill 6517 ensures that pre-service educator preparation and in-service teacher training content is informed by evidence-based Structured Literacy standards and ensures that educators entering into Connecticut's classrooms as K-6 teachers, remedial reading and remedial language arts teachers/specialists/consultants, or special educators possess a discipline-specific shared baseline of knowledge and skill associated with the principles and practices of Structured Literacy, RTI applications specific to reading, and how to recognize the signs and symptoms of dyslexia across grade levels.

Addressing Challenges Imposed on Educator Preparation Programs by Current State Regulations

House Bill 6517 helps to bring accountability and oversight to previously adopted legislation that speaks to pre-service educator preparation. This is important because without such accountability and oversight, Educator Preparation Programs are left to prepare educators exclusively in response to Connecticut's *Regulations Concerning State Educator Certificates, Permits and Authorizations*, a document that outlines preparation regulations that are nearly a quarter of a century old (23 years, to be precise). Even with House Bill 6517, revision of these regulations must remain a priority for Connecticut because educator preparation curriculum content offered by new and continuing educator preparation programs leading to certification must reflect these regulations. In many regards, these regulations are counter-productive to the state's efforts to advance current best practices in literacy on behalf of K-12 students. Consider for example, the fact that these regulations:

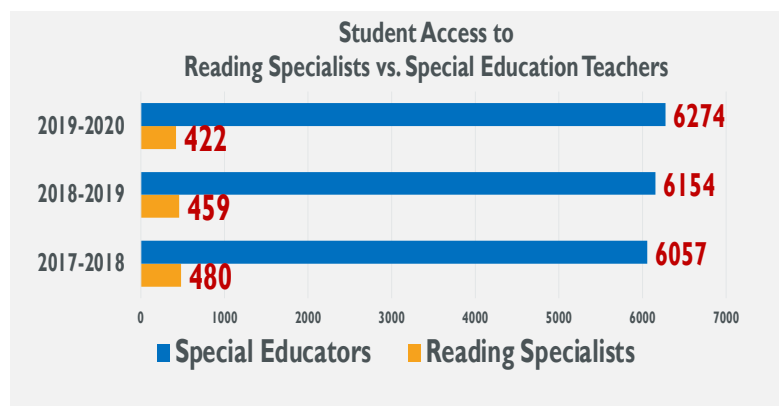
- prohibit Elementary Education certification candidates from completing a subject-area major in Developmental or Remedial Reading
- do not require Elementary Education or Special Education certification candidates to take specific coursework dedicated to developmental reading, advanced phonics concepts (e.g., multi-syllable word reading strategies), or Response to Intervention
- require candidates pursuing a Remedial Reading and Remedial Language Arts certification hold a certification in *any area* and to demonstrate *three years* of classroom teaching experience *prior to being eligible* for the certification
- do not require candidates pursuing an Intermediate Administrator or Supervisor certification (e.g., Assistant Superintendent, Principal, Assistant Principal, Curriculum Coordinator, Supervisor of Instruction, etc.) to complete any coursework dedicated to designing and implementing a school-wide reading model

Despite a lack of required scientifically based reading coursework in our current regulations, elementary and special education candidates in our state must pass the Connecticut Foundations of Reading Test (FORT) prior to being eligible for a state approved certification. This exam reflects scientifically based reading research and is aligned closely with several state policy documents, including Connecticut's Blueprint for Reading Achievement (2000) and Beyond the Blueprint: Literacy in Grades 4-12 and Across the Content Areas (2007). Not surprisingly, several preparation programs post weak initial candidate pass rates prior to then having candidates engage in a variety of test preparation activities and "boot camps". While these activities help candidates to earn passing scores on the FORT, many educators report superficial or fleeting mastery of essential domains assessed.

Unless we address the shortcomings of our current certification regulations, educator preparation programs will not be able to innovate in partnership with our local boards of education for the benefit of K-12 students in ways that produce sustainable and replicable student literacy growth.

Impacting Connecticut's Achievement Gap

As we work to advance House Bill 6517, I ask that we remain mindful of several equity and access issues that must be addressed simultaneously. In 2014, Dr. Cardona, on behalf of The Achievement Gap Task Force, made numerous recommendations designed to positively impact student achievement. One of those recommendations was to increase the pool of literacy specialists available to serve Connecticut's children.



Today, more than six years since this recommendation, there are only an estimated 422 remedial reading specialists employed by our public schools - despite ample in-state public and private educator preparation programs that prepare candidates for these positions. Of greater concern is the fact that this number represents a decline of more than 12% between the 2017-2018 and 2019-2020 academic years.

Furthermore, hiring increases in Special Education since 2017 suggest that Connecticut's efforts to advance an effective prevention and early intervention model through its RTI Framework are failing. Specifically, in Special Education, where more than one-third of students are students with Specific Learning Disabilities - and the overwhelming majority of these students present with profiles characteristic of dyslexia- we have more than 6, 700 teachers employed!

If Connecticut truly wants to advance its RTI Framework for the benefit of *all* children, the recommendation of Dr. Cardona and The Achievement Gap Task Force to increase the number of reading specialists in our schools must be heeded, and it must be heeded with consideration for equitable access. Consider for example, that recent data secured from the State Department of Education indicates that the Hartford Public Schools employs no educators under the #102: Remedial Reading and Remedial Language Arts certification, while the Greenwich Public Schools employs 18.

Another recommendation made by Dr. Cardona on behalf of Connecticut's Achievement Gap Task Force was to work with Institutes of Higher Education to ensure that new and current faculty possess the requisite expertise in the science of reading and research-based instructional practices to effectively prepare Connecticut's educators to meet the diverse literacy needs of K-12 students. House Bill 6517, through the establishment of a Connecticut Higher Education Collaborative, seeks to advance this recommendation. As outlined within the final report of Task Force 19-8, this collaborative strives to:

- Support the implementation of dyslexia-specific legislation by ensuring that participating teacher educators prepare prospective teachers to meet Task-Force approved Learner Outcomes.
- Support teacher educators in integrating content and activities aligned with Task-Force approved Learner Outcomes by providing information, materials, and technical assistance.
- Establish a collaborative community of teacher educators who support each other in the implementation of Connecticut's dyslexia-specific legislation.

With clear pre-service standards in place, courtesy of House Bill 6517, it is possible to prepare higher education faculty to meet the needs of candidates and in turn, hiring agencies and districts.

Coordinating and Innovating Efforts for the Benefit of Connecticut's Economy, Public Schools, and K-12 Students

To realize the full potential impact of House Bill 6517, in combination with Connecticut's Framework for RTI and initiatives enacted in response to the 2014 Achievement Gap Task Force Report, we must adopt a birds-eye view of our literacy landscape, commit to evaluating how it is that our state education policies- including those related to educator preparation and certification approval processes and staff hiring- have helped or hindered our economy, public schools and K-12 students, and we must think outside the proverbial box when it comes to identifying new pathways forward.

For example, with so many in-state public and private universities available to prepare educators according to the standards advanced by House Bill 6517, is it beneficial to Connecticut's economy, public schools, or K-12 students to have out of state vendors prepare educators for our classrooms?

Likewise, given that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), the federal law that provides eligible students with disabilities access to specialized education, doesn't require "special educators" serve the needs of students with disabilities, would it make sense to promote the hiring of remedial reading and remedial language arts specialists to assist with serving the remedial reading and writing needs of students with Specific Learning Disabilities, including those with dyslexia?

Again, I wish to thank you for raising House Bill 6517. The comprehensive nature of this bill is a testament to your appreciation for the potential positive and sustainable impact this legislation, coupled with existing policy and practice initiatives, could have on the literacy achievement of Connecticut's most vulnerable student populations.

I look forward to partnering with representatives from the Connecticut General Assembly, the State Department of Education, Connecticut's state and local Boards of Education, our state's public and private Institutions of Higher Education, and parent representatives to support the meaningful implementation of this legislation.

Sincere regards,

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